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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an undergraduate course for non-education majors which emphasizes rational decision making as advocated by John Dewey. The course, offered in 1976 by the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, had three instructional goals. These were to (1) provide students an opportunity to learn about current issues in American education, (2) require students to apply a model for rational decision making to one controversial education issue, and (3) familiarize students with the ideas of John Dewey. Each student selected a controversial educational issue of interest to him or her, learned a procedure for reaching a rational decision, and applied that knowledge in conducting a social inquiry (as a group member) and a values inquiry (as an individual) and in making an actual decision. In addition, an interdisciplinary core curriculum was presented through lectures, outside reading, class discussion, and films. Topics included the history of American education, the IQ controversy, busing, open education, and the philosophy of John Dewey. In addition to describing the paper, the author includes a review of the writings of Dewey and more contemporary social scientists (Hunt, Metcalf, Engle, Massialas, Cox, Oliver, Shaver, Kaltsounas, Jarolimek, and Banks) who stressed the importance of reflective thinking in making rational decisions about social issues. (AV)

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College Teaching: Integrating Knowledge Acquisition, Decision-Making Skills, and a Love for John Dewey

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SP 012 158

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College and University Faculty Assembly, November 21, 1979 in Portland, Oregon.

As a teacher educator, I constantly stress with my students the need for public school teachers to teach their pupils how to think and, more specifically, how to make rational decisions on social issues. But if I advise public school teachers to incorporate knowledge inquiry, values clarification, and decision-making as basic classroom learner activities, should I not do the same in my college classroom? I decided to take my own recommendation when I first taught an undergraduate course titled "Education in American Society" in the Summer of 1976. The course was offered by the School of Education but was intended for non-education majors.

Decision-making and the Social Studies

Leading educators have long emphasized the need to teach students how to think critically if they are to become fully functioning human beings and responsible citizens. John Dewey is a primary example of such an educator. Writing in 1909, Dewey stressed the need to help students to learn the process of reflective thinking and to develop attitudes which would lead to "a delight in thinking for the sake of thinking". The end point of reflective thinking, for Dewey, was "intelligent action".

More recently,the development of critical thinking and decision-making skills has been viewed by social studies educators as a particular concern of their curricular area. As early as 1955, Hunt and Metcalf advocated teaching high school social studies with the primary aim of helping students to examine "closed areas" of American culture (e.g., sex, race, economics) using the process of reflective thinking; inquiry into "closed areas" quite naturally lead into questions of values. Shirley Engle, in 1960, wrote a key article in which he described decision-making as "the heart of social studies instruction". Engle differentiated between the social sciences, which are concerned with the knowledge of facts and principles, and the social studies, which go beyond facts to include a consideration of values in reaching decisions on public and private matters of social concern. In Engle's opinion: "To

leave a student unaware of the values assumptions in his decision or to leave him untrained in dealing with value questions is literally to lead an innocent lamb to the slaughter (p.304)."

Massialas and Cox (1966) stated that the prime goal of social studies education is the "decision-making citizen" who engages in the "reflective examination of values and issues of current import". Oliver and Shaver (1966) emphasized the need to help students to understand the importance of values and conflicts between values in the analysis of public policy issues. Oliver and Shaver seriously questioned the adequacy of the scientific method, alone, in resolving social issues. Newmann and Oliver (1970) wrote about "rational inquiry" applied to real life problems and the need to teach students to clarify and develop "rational justification" for positions on public policy through oral discussion. By their definition, a "rational justification" involves an awareness of values and definitional and factual disagreements relevant to a particular public controversy.

Leading social studies professionals such as Kaltsounas (1971) and Jarolimek (1973) have characterized the "new" social studies of the 1970s as emphasizing the need to teach students to become more efficient decision-makers in a time of great social unrest and change. James Banks, in 1973, presented a compelling rationale for teaching students the skill of rational decision-making and developed a most useful conceptual model. Banks' model for rational decision-making begins with a decision-problem (or social issue) and proceeds, simultaneously, through a social and a value inquiry to a rational decision (and, ultimately, to an intelligent social action).

Still, in the Summer of 1976, in spite of the concern of leading educators that decision-making skills be taught in the public schools, I felt confident that few college undergraduates would have ever been taught these skills in a systematic way. My summer experience with 46[1] students at a large eastern state university did not prove me wrong.

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[1]Of the 46 students enrolled in the course, 5 were sophomores, 6 were juniors, 34 were seniors, and 1 was a graduate student. The course was taught in two separate sections.

Identifying Course Goals

In planning an undergraduate course on "Education in American Society" for non-Education majors, I began by establishing three major goals, or instructional threads, which would serve to integrate and pull together the total experience for the students. These goals included: (1) to provide students with an opportunity to acquire information about current issues in American education, (2) to require students to apply a model for rational deceision-making to one controversial educational issue, and (3) to help students to become familiar with the ideas and contributions of one of American leading educational philosophers, John Dewey.

Planning to Achieve Course Goals

Goal 1: To provide students with an opportunity to acquire information about current issues in American education. This goal was primarily achieved through the conventional means of lectures, class discussions, outside readings, and films related to the core curriculum. The core curriculum was determined by the instructor, provided a common experience for all students, and allowed the instructor to share her expertise,experience, and biases with the students. In keeping with current practice in social studies education, the approach used was interdisciplinary. That is, each topic was presented and discussed in terms of knowledge derived from all of the relevant social sciences (anthropology, economics, geography, history, philosophy, political science, psychology, and sociology). A final, in-class, examination covered student retention and understanding of the core curriculum.

In addition to gaining knowledge related to the core curriculum, each student was required to do library research (i.e., knowledge inquiry) on one

controversial issue in education selected by the student. The knowledge derived was used in a group oral presentation as well as in the final decision-making paper (see Goal 2).

Goal 2: To require students to apply a model for rational decision-making to one controversial issue. In preparation, and as part of the core curriculum, the students were presented with Banks'(1977) model for rational decision-making (see Figure 1). To summarize, the decision-maker begin with a problem (social issue), participates in social inquiry to gain knowledge and in value inquiry to clarify personal values, and then uses the resultant knowledge and clarified values as the basis for making a rational decision.

If students were to be able to apply the model, it was essential that they be able to differentiate between researchable or experimental questions ("What is?") and value or decision problems ("What should be?"). They had to be helped to realize that decision-making on a social issue requires one to answer a values question (What should be?), and thus one's decision must reflect a synthesis of social knowledge and personal values. It was emphasized that while a group of students might be able to agree on the answer to a researchable question (What is?), they might not be able to agree on a value question (What should be?).

The initial presentation to students of the Banks model concluded with a discussion of possible sources of knowledge (i.e., answers to researchable questions) with an emphasis on the advantages of knowledge derived from the application of the scientific method in each of the eight social science disciplines. Of particular value were the works of Charles Peirce (as summarized in Banks) on sources of knowledge and of Banks on the structure of each of the social science disciplines.

Elaborating on the values component of the Banks decision-making model, the core curriculum included a lecture/discussion session on the nature and function of values and on the process of values clarification. Having been assigned to read Herman Melville's short story, "Billy Budd", students were asked to address

the question: "Should Captain Vere have sentenced Billy Budd to be hanged?" An exercise in values clarification, including a discussion of alternative courses of action, possible consequences of alternatives, and the values implied by each alternative was conducted by the instructor.[2]

On the second day of class each student had been assigned to a small group which had then identified one controversial issue to research (see Goal 3). Each small group was instructed to conduct a social inquiry to answer all of the "What is?" questions relevant to its decision problem. That is, each group was to collect, analyze, and synthesize all pertinent (research based) knowledge from each of the social science disciplines. Later, each group had one class session in which to present its findings, regarding "What is?", to the whole class. For example, a group working on the value question, "Should blacks be bused to schools in white neighborhoods?", would attempt to answer, as a group, relevant researchable questions such as: "Do integrated schools positively affect the academic achievement of blacks?", "What effect does school integration have on the expressed racial attitudes of white students?", "Does busing increase school costs?", "What is the history of busing in America?"; "What does the law say?".

Having thus laid the groundwork for attaining Goal 2, each student was required to write a personal decision paper on his or her group's "crucial issue in education". Each paper was to include (1) a statement of the problem, (2) a review of the social knowledge ("What is?") which seemed most relevant and important to that student in making a decision, (3) an identification of the personal values and value conflicts involved in making a decision, (4) a discussion of alternative decisions and their possible consequences, (5) a statement of decision (choice between alternatives), and (6) a statement of reason(s) for choice or decision. Papers were evaluated

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[2] See Newman and Oliver (1970, pp. 42-70) for a detailed analytic scheme which can be used to help structure this values clarification experience.

as to the students' success in applying the Banks decision-making model to a controversial issue of concern to the student.

Goal 3: To help students to become familiar with the ideas and contributions of John Dewey. This goal was accomplished in part by the use of lecture presentations on the life, ideas, and significance of the work of John Dewey. In addition, students were given the assignment to read of one of Dewey's works, Experience and Education (1973). More importantly perhaps, the instructor made every attempt to incorporate John Dewey's educational philosophy into the nature and structure of the course. For example, in order to facilitate group interaction and a sense of the class as a social entity, the first day of the course was devoted to a human relations, "get acquainted" experience.

Following Dewey's observation that learning proceeds from curiosity or a felt need to know, each student had an active role in the selection of the controversial issue which he or she would later research. In an early class discussion, students were asked to describe, on the basis of their reading of newspaper and news magazines, watching of TV, and own experience in the public schools, the "main problems or issues in education today". As issues were generated by the students, they were listed by the instructor on the board and by each student on a worksheet. (It is perhaps a commentary on American education that they were able to generate approximately 40 "issues" with very little coaxing.) Using the worksheet listing "crucial issues in education today", each student was instructed to rank the issues from most important (to him or her as an individual) to least important. After a student completed his or her individual ranking, he or she was to meet with two other class members chosen at random. The trio of students then worked to achieve consensus, by whatever means necessary, on the "ten most important issues". As the trios completed this task, they met with another trio (to form a sextet) and negotiated to establish the "five most important issues". In the final round of consensus seeking, each sextet narrowed its list down to the "one most important issue". This one issue then became the basis for that group of individuals inquiry and decision-making for the remainder of the course.

Overall, students were provided with a number of group or social experiences as part of the structure of the course: in the initial human relations "ice breaking" exercise, in the consensus seeking activity, and in the group work to research their topic and to plan an oral presentation. Most critically, I believe, the instructor attempted to model Dewey's approach to education by teaching the students how to think, using the Banks decision-making model, using a reflective process.

Summary and Conclusions

To recap, each student participated in the selection of a controversial issue in education of high importance to her or him, was taught a specific procedure for reaching a rational decision on a social issue, and was required to apply this knowledge in conducting a social inquiry (as a group member) and a value inquiry (as an individual) and in making an actual decision. In addition to active participation in research and decision-making on one social issue, each student heard a group presentation of relevant data (social knowledge) on each of four other controversial issues.

Each student was also exposed to (and tested on) a core curriculum selected by the instructor. The core curriculum included topics such as: the history of American education with a particular emphasis on the roles and contributions of women and blacks, the philosophy of John Dewey, the IQ controversy, busing, the sociology of teachers and teaching, M:ACOS, open education, etc. The core curriculum was implemented by the conventional means of lecture, outside reading, class discussion, and films.[3]

Finally, in addition to presenting students with factual knowledge about the life and ideas of John Dewey, the course was designed to clearly reflect Dewey's

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[3]For a more complete description of the organization of the course, including a day-by-day calendar of topics and related activities, see R. Woolever, "Teaching rational decision-making." Improving College and University Teaching, 1978, 26, 221-24.

philosophy. An essay question on the final exam asked students to: "List and discuss all of the specific ways in which this course had reflected Dewey's ideas about the purpose of education, how students learn, the role of the teacher, etc."

On the final day of class the 46 enrolled students were given an opportunity to evaluate the course, anonymously, on a 16 item questionnaire. Comments on the "group consensus activity to choose issues" were overwhelmingly positive. For example: "Good. We chose the topics, but it was well structured by the professor." "Good practice in compromise." "Good. Allowed students to work on what they thought was most important." "Very democratic process." And, from the class pessimist, "Worked better than expected."

Response to the "decision paper" was more mixed. On the positive side, student reaction included: "Good, enabled us to use facts from our group projects then put in our own values to express our opinions and decisions on the topic." "This was a great experience for me--good values-clarification experience." "Gave us a chance to really express how we felt about an issue and not merely research from other sources." And finally: "I very much enjoyed doing this. (After all the research papers, someone finally wanted to know what I thought--thanks!!)" Negative feedback on the position paper included comments such as: "Difficult" and "More difficult to write than I imagined." But more significantly, one student wrote: "Strict format made the paper easy to write, but should we encourage 'mass produced' paper? Seems a stifling of creativity."

The final item on the questionnaire asked for "other comments", and most students used this space to respond to the course as a whole. While a number of students complained about the amount of outside reading (related to the core curriculum), and several indicated a preference for more lectures, only one student questioned the appropriateness of the course format or content for college undergraduates: "The course tended to be a little Mickey Mouse, high schoolish at times." This same student went on to say: "However, I generally thought her

[the instructor's] class techniques worked and were stimulating to the class."

In general, the summary evaluation statements were extremely positive. Four students wrote that the course was the best, or one of the best, that they had had at the university. For example:

> The course was the best I've had here, in terms of learning and enjoyment. For the very first time, I was doing research and work on a project because of interest and because I wanted to do a good job, not just for a grade!!!

While almost all of the students were positive in their final over-all evaluation, the positive comments ranged from the quotation above to less euphoric reactions such as: "I'm glad it wasn't the 'slide' I was expecting, because I got a lot out of it", and "Ed 41 wasn't such a bore after all!"

It is apparent that there is a long lag between professional insight and recommendation and wide spread implementation in the public schools. We at the university, while continuing to advocate the teaching of rational decision-making skills at the pre-college level, must not put our head in the sand while working with undergraduates. If our students have not been taught these critical skills, then we must take direct action to avoid sending another flock of innocent lambs to the slaughter.

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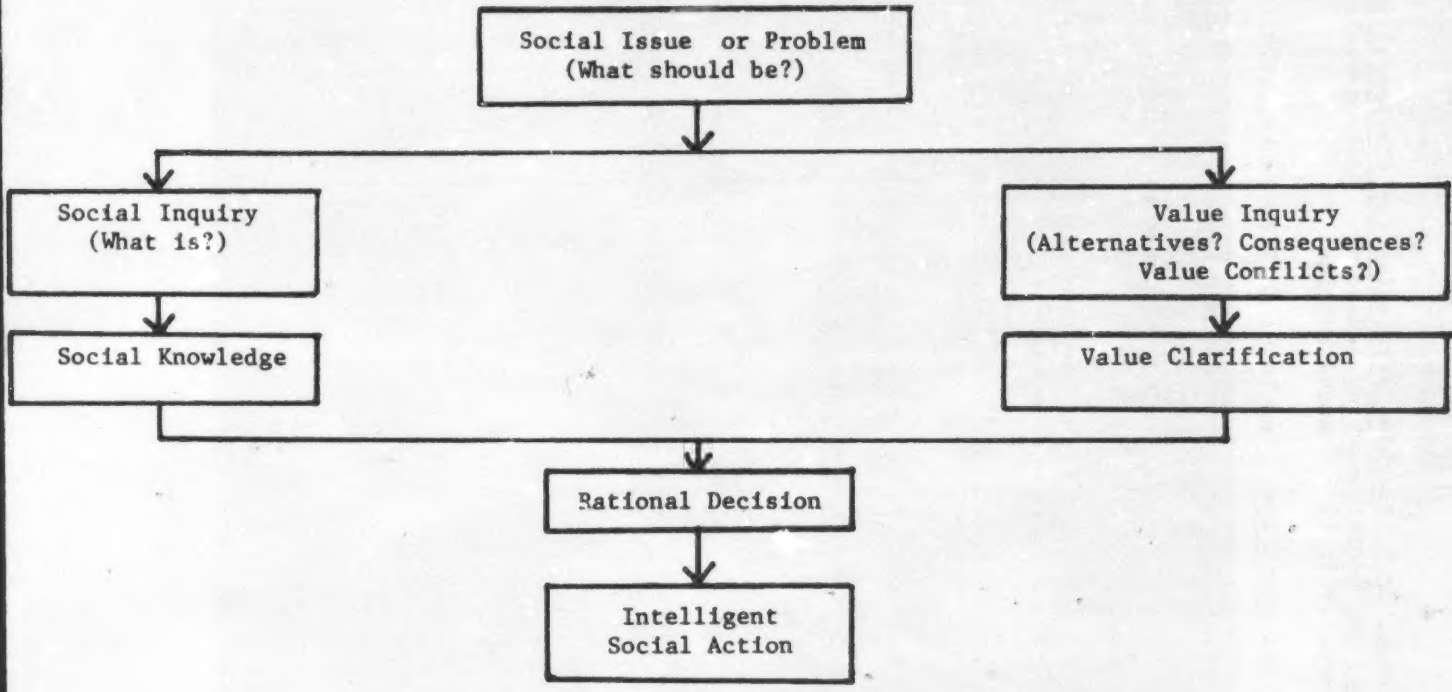
Figure 1

BANKS MODEL FOR RATIONAL DECISION-MAKING*



* Adapted from Banks (1977), p. 29.